



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:

The Expansion of Croatian Ethno-nationalism: a case of Vukovar

Nikica Kolar


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: : Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

The Expansion of Croatian Ethno-nationalism: a case of Vukovar

Summary

Every year, on the eve of the Vukovar Remembrance Day, the ruling political and social establishment promotes dominant ethno-nationalist views or, in case of left-centre governments, doesn't challenge them. This year, after the national and local authorities extended a temporary ban towards certain undesirable persons and/or events from the public to a whole week before the Vukovar Remembrance Day, columnist Boris Dežulović openly rebelled against the "cancel culture" in his column. His writing was severely criticized by ethno-nationalists and it revealed that the authorities are ready to tolerate hate speech towards the critic, as happened to Dežulović. Ethno-nationalism is spreading and closing Croatian society that is sinking more and more into hatred and demographic decline.

Introduction

In the War of Independence (also called the Homeland War), the city of Vukovar suffered the greatest casualties and remained in the collective memory as "Vukovar — a heroic city." Every year, on the eve of the fall of Vukovar (November 18), politicians, war veterans and media recall the war and horrific events that took place during the Battle of Vukovar and events that followed after the fall of Vukovar into enemy hands - the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serb paramilitary units. Media broadcasts and publishes recordings and retellings of the killing of Croatian civilians and the taking of prisoners of war to Serb camps. No one can be indifferent to these atrocities, and that is a reason why every year the ruling political actors remind Croatian citizens of sacrifice that Vukovar made in the War of Independence. This ideological nationalistic manoeuvre is not harmless. It systematically shapes identity and values of Croatian citizens. It breeds and sustains Croatian ethno-nationalism and hostility towards the Serbian population in Croatia and Serbia, because of the constant reminder what atrocities Vukovar and its inhabitants suffered in war from JNA and Serbian paramilitary forces (massacre of prisoners of war, expulsion of civilians, rape, and total destruction of the city). If the whole ideological package remained on a one-day and/or short-term narrative, this whole spread of hate would be marginal for the society. On the other hand, some citizens of Vukovar frequently express their discontent regarding Remembrance Day, in a manner that it is the only

day in the whole year that the government and the rest of the society remembers the social situation of Vukovar.

In the meantime, Croatian nationalism in the variant of the emotionally charged Vukovar Remembrance Day has expanded. Vukovar, officially as a "place of special homeland respect"¹, is no longer formally commemorated only on November 18, but that tragic date, a day when it is forbidden to feel anything but piety for Vukovar, is politically extended to a whole week, even a month in some parts of Croatia. Some prominent war veterans would like the strict regime of piety towards Vukovar to be maintained for three months, which is how long the Battle for Vukovar lasted.²

During the week of remembrance, in principle, it is no longer possible to organize entertainment events in the week around November 18. Since last year, the Vukovar Remembrance Day is a national holiday.

This ban is especially valid if the main actors of the events are people of Serbian origin.

Cancellation of Rade Šerbedžija's concert

From November 7 to November 15, the 5th Actor Film Festival was held in the Vinkovci city³. On the last day, a concert of the famous actor Rade Šerbedžija was to be held, however, local authorities and event organizers told Šerbedžija and his team that because the concert was held in the "week of remembrance of the Vukovar victim", the concert would be cancelled, i.e. postponed for December. Anyone who knows the Croatian historical and political context understands why Šerbedžija's concert on November 15 was cancelled — because he is a Serb, even worse, a popular Serb in Croatia, and Serbs are the main enemies in the Croatian nationalist narrative. Will Croatians allow a Serb to earn money from a concert during the a week of remembrance for the victim of Vukovar? — that is what the mayor of Vinkovci implied in his Facebook post⁴. Šerbedžija commented on the decision also on his Facebook profile⁵, calling the cancellation of his concert an act of “pure play of politics”, because his songs

¹[Parliament adopts law proclaiming Vukovar place of special respect | Croatian Parliament \(sabor.hr\)](#)

²[Slobodna Dalmacija - Ne smiruju se strasti oko Dežulovićeve kolumne o Vukovaru, Fred Matić: 'Štrečno me, alinemat mu što zamjeriti'; Ivan Kovačić: 'Neki bi voljeli da smo izgubili rat'](#)

³[Kreće 5. Film festival glumca u Vinkovcima - Hrvatsko društvo filmskih djelatnika \(hdfd.hr\)](#)

⁴[HDZ je zabranio Šerbedžiji da pjevasamozatošto je Srbin - Index.hr](#)

⁵[Facebook](#)

"propagate love, humanism and gentleness" and therefore cannot insult the victims of Vukovar, to the contrary⁶.

Although it seems that Šerbedžija is not allowed to perform because he is ethnically a Serb, the exclusion of cultural and social events during November extends to other forms of art and organizers. In November 2017, the European Theatre Night event was postponed because nationalists, especially those within war veterans' circles, considered it an insult to commemorate Vukovar if people went to theatres to have fun on the day they should remember the Vukovar victims. Over the years, it seems that the nationalistic interpretation of the war in the 1990s has hardened. Judging by the overwhelmingly nationalist political narrative and media focus, it seems that in November Croatian citizens are expected to only express piety and experience the suffering of Vukovar. This is accompanied by messages of distrust towards Serbs, a respect for war veterans and a desire of loyalty of Croatian citizens towards the ruling HDZ party (eng. Croatian Democratic Union).

Sharp criticism of columnist Boris Dežulović in his column “Je.. vas Vukovar⁷”

A well-known columnist and satirist Boris Dežulović regularly reacts to the nationalist censorship. After the announcement that Šerbedžija's concert would be cancelled for what seems to be ethnically motivated reasons, Dežulović decided to write a critique with vulgar expressions to raise as much attention as possible to what was happening in society. On November 2, Dežulović wrote a column for the N1 portal "Je.. vas Vukovar" in which he analyzed the political manipulation of nationalists with Vukovar, a demographic decline of Vukovar, and emphasized his anger with vulgar expressions such as "f... you"⁸. Dežulović's vulgar expressions seem to have paid off. The column was very well read and many Croatian readers supported him, although not in the same manner. One group praised Dežulović for finally writing what many think, one group agreed with him in principle, but not with vulgar expressions he used in the text for Vukovar and/or the general use of vulgarisms in media⁹.

⁶[Zašto je otkazan Šerbedžijin koncert u Vinkovcima? | HDZ | Al Jazeera](#)

⁷ Not really translatable in English, but in some sense it is “May your Vukovar fuck you”.

⁸[Jebo vas Vukovar - N1 \(n1info.com\)](#)

⁹[Dežulović: I Wrote about Trade in Horrible Sacrifice of Vukovar \(total-croatia-news.com\)](#)

Strong reaction to Dežulović's column: the Ministry opened doors to hate speech

There was no need to wait for the reaction of the right wing nationalists to the Dežulović's column. The Ministry of Croatian Veterans reacted immediately and stated that the column was an insult to the victims of Vukovar and a violation of the values of the Declaration of the Homeland War¹⁰. The Ministry's reaction was interpreted by nationalists as an open season for Dežulović's life. In short time in the public sphere and primarily on the social media, Dežulović received many open death threats, even from well-known public figures¹¹. Such a witch-hunt against a journalist has not been seen since the 1990s during the authoritarian rule of Franjo Tuđman. This is another proof that the freedom of press in Croatia is in decline. The police stated that they are investigating the death threats to Dežulović, but no-one is assured that the police will really process the authors of these hate speech acts, because it didn't do so in so many times before¹².

Conclusion

The events around Vukovar Remembrance Day add additional light on the efforts that the current political establishment invests in shaping the identity of Croatian society by giving the central prominence to the war in the 1990s and the victimhood of the Croatian people. This authoritarian dimension of ethno-nationalism is most evident in the manipulation of the symbol of the victim of Vukovar, where everyone who is (ethnically) different, who (politically) thinks differently and those who do not want to submit to the will of nationalists is criticized and temporarily or permanently excluded (depends on the situation). Previously, these public actors and manifestations were temporarily excluded from the public on the Vukovar Remembrance Day on November 18, but now the exclusionary practice have been extended to a whole week, with a tendency to a month or more. Ethno-nationalism, therefore, is transforming Croatian society into an ever more closed and narrow-minded place to live.

¹⁰[War veterans' ministry: N1 columnist 'insults Vukovar victims' - N1 \(n1info.com\)](#)

¹¹[Veličina maloumlja - Portal Novosti](#)

¹²[Croatian Police Investigate Threats to Columnist Over Vukovar Column | Balkan Insight](#)